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**The Palimpsest**

Volume 15 | Number 12

Article 3

12-1-1934

# Comment

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## Recommended Citation

Briggs, John E. "Comment." *The Palimpsest* 15 (1934), 406-407.  
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol15/iss12/3>

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## Comment by the Editor

### OF BALLADS

A ballad in print is a kind of perversion. Like a clown at a wedding, the natural exuberance of expression is quite overwhelmed by the dignity of the formal array of verses and stanzas. The inflexible precision of recorded sentiment seems wholly incongruous with the spontaneity which probably characterized the original composition. Ballads are inherently vital, not petrified; transient, not permanent.

The folks who create these poetic descriptions are completely indifferent to the fate of their rhymes. What one suggests, another improves. If a new stanza is needed or the deeds of a neighborhood hero deserve celebration, the ballad is changed to suit the occasion. Some become fixed by long usage, but others vary according to local tradition. All are essentially impromptu and oral. They frequently grow in fantastic patterns, like frost on a window pane. To print them is to etch the erstwhile design in the glass with strong acid.

If the publication of ballads is a form of literary archaeology, some historical value may accrue from the anachronistic display of homely artifacts



of previous culture. The native songs of a people constitute a mirror of other times. But scholarly research and catalogues of variants can scarcely revive the spirit of old-fashioned musical relaxation.

All ballads ought to be sung. To read one is almost impertinent. Let everybody join in the lilt-ing or melancholy tune, whole-heartedly and unabashed, jubilantly or sad according to the mood, but without concern for rhetoric or sense. Let rhythm and sentiment be unrestrained. That is the style of the ballad.

Perhaps the acceptance of the radio counterfeit is a test of our civilization. We watch the game instead of playing it; we listen to professional nonsense instead of creating our own. Indeed, it seems that we even submit to being sung at instead of to.

J. E. B.